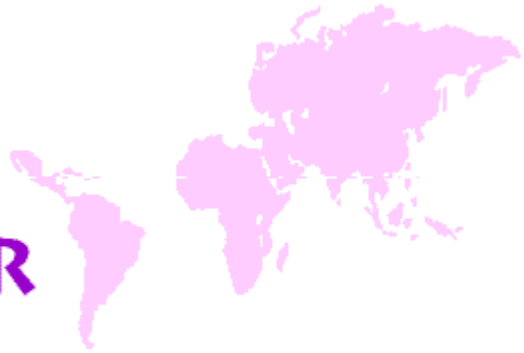
THIRD WORLD TRAVELER



Methods of Media Manipulation

by Michael Parenti

from the book

20 years of Censored News

by Carl Jensen and Project Censored

We are told by people in the media industry that news bias is unavoidable. Whatever distortions and inaccuracies that are found in the news are caused by deadline pressures, human misjudgment, limited print space, scarce air time, budgetary restraints, and the difficulty of reducing a complex story into a concise report. Furthermore, the argument goes, no communication system can hope to report everything. Selectivity is needed, and some members of the public are bound to be dissatisfied.

I agree that those kinds of difficulties exist. Still, I would argue that the media's misrepresentations are not merely the result of innocent error and everyday production problems. True, the press has to be selective- but what principle of selectivity is involved? Media bias does not occur in random fashion; rather it moves in the same overall direction again and again, favoring management over labor, corporations over corporate critics, affluent whites over inner-city poor, officialdom over protesters, the two-party monopoly over leftist third parties, privatization and free market "reforms" over public sector development, U.S. dominance of the Third World over revolutionary or populist social change, nation-security policy over critics of that policy, and conservative commentators and columnists like Rush Limbaugh and George Will over progressive or populist ones like Jim Hightower and Ralph Nader (not to mention more radical ones).

The built-in biases of the corporate mainstream media faithfully reflect the dominant ideology, seldom straying into territory that might cause discomfort to those who hold political and economic power, including those who own the media or advertise in it. What follows is an incomplete sketch of the methods by which those biases are packaged and presented.

Omission and suppression

Manipulation often lurks in the things left unmentioned. The most common form of media misrepresentation is omission. Sometimes the omission includes not just vital details of a story but the entire story itself, even ones of major import. As just noted, stories that might reflect poorly upon the powers that be are the least likely to see the light of day. Thus the Tylenol poisoning of several people by a deranged individual was treated as big news but the far more sensational story of the industrial brown-lung poisoning of thousands of factory workers by large manufacturing interests (who themselves own or advertise in the major media) has remained suppressed for decades, despite the best efforts of worker safety groups to bring the issue before the public.

We hear plenty about the political repression perpetrated by left-wing governments such as Cuba (though a recent State Department report actually cited only six political prisoners in Cuba), but almost nothing about the far more brutal oppression and mass killings perpetrated by U.S.-supported right-wing client states such as Turkey, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, El Salvador, Guatemala, and others too numerous to mention.

Often the media mute or downplay truly sensational (as opposed to sensationalistic) stories. Thus, in 1965 the Indonesian military-advised, equipped, trained, and financed by the U.S. military and the CIA-overthrew President Achmed Sukarno and eradicated the Indonesian Communist Party and its allies, killing half a million people (some estimates are as high as a million) in what was the greatest act of political mass murder since the Nazi Holocaust. The generals also destroyed hundreds of clinics, libraries, schools, and community centers that had been opened by the communists. Here was a sensational story if ever there was one, but it took three months before it received passing mention in Time magazine and yet another month before it was reported in The New York Times (4/5/66), accompanied by an editorial that actually praised the Indonesian military for "rightly playing its part with utmost caution."

Lies, bald and repetitive

When omission proves to be an insufficient form of suppression, the media resort to outright lies. At one time or another over the course of forty years, the CIA involved itself with drug traffickers in Italy, France, Corsica, Indochina, Afghanistan, and Central and South America. Much of this activity was the object of extended congressional investigations and is a matter of public record. But the media seem not to have heard about it.

In August 1996, when the San Jose Mercury News published an in-depth series about the CIA-contra-crack shipments that were flooding East Los Angeles, the major media held true to form and suppressed the story. But after the series was circulated around the world on the Web, the story became too difficult to ignore, and the media began its assault. Articles in the Washington Post and The New York Times and reports on network television and PBS announced that there was "no evidence" of CIA involvement, that the Mercury News series was "bad journalism," and that the public's interest in this subject was the real problem, a matter of gullibility, hysteria, and conspiracy mania. In fact, the Mercury News series, drawing from a year long investigation, cited specific agents and dealers. When placed on the Web, the series was copiously supplemented with pertinent documents and depositions that supported the charge. The mainstream media simply ignored that evidence and repeatedly lied by saying that it did not exist.

Labeling

Like all propagandists, media people seek to prefigure our perception of a subject with a positive or negative label. Some positive ones are: "stability," "the president's firm leadership," "a strong defense," and "a healthy economy." Indeed, who would want instability, weak presidential leader ship, a vulnerable defense, and a sick economy? The label defines the subject, and does it without having to deal with actual particulars that might lead us to a different conclusion.

Some common negative labels are: "leftist guerrillas," "Islamic terrorists", "conspiracy theories," "inner-city gangs," and "civil disturbances." These, too, are seldom treated within a larger context of social relations and issues. The press itself is facilely and falsely labeled "the liberal media" by the hundreds of conservative columnists, commentators, and talk-show hosts who crowd the communication universe while claiming to be shut out from it.

Face value transmission

One way to lie is to accept at face value what are known to be official lies, uncritically passing them on to the public without adequate confirmation. For the better part of four years, in the early 1950s, the press performed this function for Senator Joseph McCarthy, who went largely unchallenged as he brought charge after charge of treason and communist subversion against people whom he could not have victimized without the complicity of the national media.

Face-value transmission has characterized the press's performance in almost every area of domestic and foreign policy, so much so that journalists have been referred to as "stenographers of power." (Perhaps some labels are well deserved.) When challenged on this, reporters respond that they cannot inject their own personal ideology into their reports. Actually, no one is asking them to. My criticism is that they already do. Their conventional ideological perceptions usually coincide with those of their bosses and with officialdom in general, making them faithful purveyors of the prevailing orthodoxy. This confluence of bias is perceived as "objectivity."

False balancing

In accordance with the canons of good journalism, the press is supposed to tap competing sources to get both sides of an issue. In fact, both sides are seldom accorded equal prominence. One study found that on NPR, supposedly the most liberal of the mainstream media, right-wing spokespeople are often interviewed alone, while liberals-on the less frequent occasions they appear-are almost always offset by conservatives. Furthermore, both sides of a story are not necessarily all sides. Left-progressive and radical views are almost completely shut out.

During the 1980s, television panel discussions on defense policy pitted "experts" who wanted to maintain the existing high levels of military spending against other "experts" who wanted to increase the military budget even more. Seldom if ever heard were those who advocated drastic reductions in the defense budget.

Framing

The most effective propaganda is that which relies on framing rather than on falsehood. By bending the truth rather than breaking it, using emphasis and other auxiliary embellishments, communicators can

create a desired impression without resorting to explicit advocacy and without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity. Framing is achieved in the way the news is packaged, the amount of exposure, the placement (front page or buried within, lead story or last), the tone of presentation (sympathetic or slighting), the headlines and photographs, and, in the case of broadcast media, the accompanying visual and auditory effects.

Newscasters use themselves as auxiliary embellishments. They cultivate a smooth delivery and try to convey an impression of detachment that places them above the rough and tumble of their subject matter. Television commentators and newspaper editorialists and columnists affect a knowing style and tone designed to foster credibility and an aura of certitude or what might be called authoritative ignorance, as expressed in remarks like "How will the situation end? Only time will tell." Or, "No one can say for sure." (Better translated as, "I don't know and if I don't know then nobody does.") Sometimes the aura of authoritative credibility is preserved by palming off trite truisms as penetrating truths. So newscasters learn to fashion sentences like "Unless the strike is settled soon, the two sides will be in for a long and bitter struggle." And "The space launching will take place as scheduled if no unexpected problems arise." And "Because of heightened voter interest, election-day turnout is expected to be heavy." And "Unless Congress acts soon, this bill is not likely to go anywhere."

We are not likely to go anywhere as a people and a democracy unless we alert ourselves to the methods of media manipulation that are ingrained in the daily production of news and commentary. The news media regularly fail to provide a range of information and commentary that might help citizens in a democracy develop their own critical perceptions. The job of the corporate media is to make the universe of discourse safe for corporate America, telling us what to think about the world before we have a chance to think about it for ourselves. When we understand that news selectivity is likely to favor those who have power, position, and wealth, we move from a liberal complaint about the press's sloppy performance to a radical analysis of how the media serve the ruling circles all too well with much skill and craft.

Michael Parenti received his Ph.D. in political science from Yale University in 1962, and has taught at a number of colleges and universities. He is the author of thirteen books, including Democracy for a Few (6th edition); Power and the Powerless; Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media (2nd edition); The Sword and the Dollar: Imperialism, Revolution and the Arms Race; Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment; Land of Idols, Political Mythology in America; Against Empire: Dirty Truths; and Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism. Dr. Parenti's articles have appeared in a wide range of scholarly journals and political periodicals. He lives in Berkeley, California, and devotes him self full-time to writing and lecturing around the country.

Media Control and Propaganda

Authors and Books